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VOCATIONAL GUIDANCE AND PUBLIC EDUCATION

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At the First National Conference on Vocational Guidance held in Boston under the joint auspices of the Boston Vocation Bureau and the Boston Chamber of Commerce on November 15 and 16, 1910, several hundred persons were in attendance. Forty-five cities sent delegates, including cities as widely separated as New York, Baltimore, Pittsburg, Chicago, and Grand Rapids. It is apparent that the problems of systematic vocational guidance are attracting the attention their importance deserves.

These problems are, of course, not new. But organization for systematic attention to them is very recent. It has been stimulated by and is naturally associated with three important contemporary tendencies in public education. These tendencies are really only different phases of one comprehensive movement for approximating more closely our democratic ideal of individual welfare and social progress. They are: the safeguarding and promotion of bodily health and vigor, by an important extension of the work of the departments of school hygiene and physical training in our schools; the progressive establishment of public vocational schools of elementary and secondary grade, that is, of vocational schools other than professional schools, for increasing the efficiency of all who work in industry, agriculture, or commerce; and a widespread effort to make the non-vocational schools we already have, of every grade and kind, more vital—that is, to make the pupil's school life so significant a part of his whole life that it shall be and remain a guiding force, no matter at what point his school life must close.

The increased attention to bodily health and strength in school is the natural concomitant of the awakened public interest in physical welfare not merely for its own sake but also as one

of our most important social resources. Quite apart from the misery ill-health or physical weakness usually entails, it is clear that economic efficiency depends on health; hence the boards of health, school physicians, school nurses, school meals for the needy, open-air schools, supervised play, and public playgrounds.

The establishment of elementary and secondary schools at public expense for the training of workers in our industries, on our farms, and in commerce is making decided progress. Throughout the country such schools are being discussed or are already actually established. Notably in New York, Massachusetts, and Connecticut, and in some of the western states, the state is lending its aid to the maintenance of such schools, and in each of these states public schools founded within the last five years are in operation; similar schools founded by philanthropic and other agencies have rendered important service for years past. Occasionally, also, some large industrial or commercial establishments have provided themselves with schools for the training of the workers they need. All such schools—schools of commerce, of industry, of agriculture, whether day schools, part-time schools, day or evening continuation schools—are a response to the demand for increasing economic efficiency, without which individual welfare and social progress are impossible.

The demand for public vocational schools would not have arisen if the existing public schools had supplied it. It was believed, and by some persons it is still believed, that satisfactory vocational training can be provided by the traditional public schools, although this possibility is widely questioned; and many experiments are now under way to test this question. These experiments will be watched with care, as the vocational schools will be. In the course of time we shall have had the experience we need to enable us to decide as to their intrinsic and relative value.

Such an examination of the aims and work of the traditional public schools is by no means new; it is in fact perennial; but the recent and contemporary interest in vocational education has reinforced it. Hence the third marked tendency in educational activity today—an effort to make the school a more effective

factor in shaping the pupil's career. While enabling him to appreciate the spiritual and the institutional (political) resources and problems of our age, it should also render him responsive to our economic resources and problems, and in particular bring home to him the importance and the dignity of *work* of all kinds as the foundation of all individual and social welfare.

This involves a reorganization of the subject-matter of instruction, of the teaching, and of the management of the pupils. Each study is to be seen by the pupil to be a bit of organized human experience, and his mastery of it is to result in the power to be an effective participator and not merely a spectator in the world's affairs. At the same time the management or discipline of the school is to make the pupil progressively responsive to his duties as well as to his privileges. At the outset he is completely dependent on his parents and teachers for moral insight and guidance, but as his insight into his privileges and responsibilities develops he must shape his conduct in harmony therewith, and do this more and more by his own volition. It is the special task of the school to insure this result by the wisest discipline it can devise—by incentives and deterrents that, so far as possible, are seen by the pupil to possess a progressive and a permanent value. In a word, the demand today is to make culture *dynamic*, not static—to make it not merely the valued possession of the individual, the means of promoting his bodily health and his intelligence, but also to shape his character, to make him a living force in the economic, political, and spiritual progress of the social whole of which he is a part—to enable him to do this, as has been said, not merely as “preparation for life” later on, but as life itself, so far as he can understand it; to make the school that part of the pupil's life at the time which makes all of it, then and thereafter, more significant and valuable.

This is the meaning of the contention that the work of the school shall be more vital, and of the effort to make it so. It is clear that with this tendency well established in the schools the question of vocational guidance is a pressing question. Where this tendency is not yet marked, vocational guidance is equally essential, for there the pupil is likely to be quite helpless when

he makes the transition from school to vocation—a momentous transition indeed. This transition cannot be safe unless the choice of the pupil's life-career is deliberate. Even then mistakes will be made, but we may expect that they will be small in number and importance as compared with the mistakes of random choice or mere "job-hunting."

A wise choice of a calling demands accessible opportunities of satisfactory preparation for it, adaptation of personality and capacity, and a knowledge of the conditions of employment and of the prospective rewards, material, spiritual, and social, of satisfactory work in it. These are problems of vocational guidance. How much depends on their satisfactory solution for each ambitious youth both for himself and for society, need not be dwelt upon. What we must deplore now is the absence of such guidance for the great majority of each generation, and the fact until quite recently we have been unconscious of our duty in this respect; or at least that we have not endeavored to equip ourselves satisfactorily to discharge that duty. It is the object of this paper to direct public attention to the need of vocational guidance for the oncoming generation, and to the duty of providing organized local plans for giving such guidance in as satisfactory a way as can be worked out.

Who the wisest vocation counselors may be, in the end, we cannot now say. Perhaps the parents, made conscious by their own vocational guidance in youth of its significance and importance, and more responsive to their whole duty to their children in this respect than most of them have been in the past; perhaps the employers of children and youth, also rendered more responsive to the permanent welfare of their employees than many of them now are, and knowing better than anyone else the advantages and the limitations of the employment they offer; perhaps the teachers, always solicitous for the future of their charges and rendered by some training for this work more competent to cope with the difficult problems of vocational guidance than most of them now feel themselves to be; perhaps a body of vocational counselors specially trained for the purpose—a body of men and women each of whom knows equally well the

children and youth whom they counsel and a group of employments open to them. But, whoever may be the wisest counselors in the end, it is clear that we cannot wait to make a beginning. There is too much at stake. Our present duty is plain, namely, to seek to give to all these prospective and present counselors—for they have been and they will continue to be vocational advisers—the best available equipment for their responsibilities. This is one of our most important tasks, and one of the most difficult.

From what has been said, it is clear that much preparation is needed by those on whom the duty of vocational guidance may fall. Information must be had of the young people themselves, their physical condition, their capacity, their ambitions, the opportunities and circumstances of their lives; similarly, information is needed about occupations, their advantages and disadvantages in view of the natural and acquired equipment for them possessed by their prospective workers, the kind of preparation required for them, and the extent and quality of the available preparation for a progressive career in them, and what success in them means. To gather this information and make it available for use will require time and effort. And to give satisfactory guidance by properly trained persons to the great body of young people whose life-work is now almost inevitably determined by chance will require an army of devoted workers.

Of course, preparation for the transition from school life to life-work must be gradual. That transition must be seen from afar by the pupil. Vocational guidance cannot be safely deferred until the pupil is on the threshold of the world's work. A satisfactory vocation must be a goal toward which his thoughts and ambitions have been directed during the entire period of his tutelage. But the school must not prematurely narrow the pupil's outlook or his educational opportunities.

Up to about fourteen years of age, by statute, in all progressive countries, all children must go to school. But when they are fourteen years old most of them must face the problem of *how to make a living*. For some time they have been asking, "What am I to be?" At this moment, general or incidental vocational information is no longer adequate. It is accordingly a

culminating period for specific vocational guidance. The counselor is not to tell the pupil now, or at any time, what vocation to enter. It is his duty to make sure that whatever vocation the pupil enters, he enters it deliberately, and with as full a knowledge of all that this step means as can be obtained. The counselor does not prescribe a vocation which the pupil takes. The pupil chooses his vocation after full consideration of all the factors and consequences of his choice. Nevertheless, the time for choice has come, and the issues must be met.

It is clear, by the way, that one important duty of all the advisers of youth is to bring home to all who can be brought to see it the enormous value of more education for every capable pupil, no matter when he leaves school—and no matter whether the chief purpose of the school he attends is to teach him how to live or how to make a living. One valuable result of satisfactory vocational counseling ought therefore to be to lengthen the period of education for all but the incurably dull or the permanently unambitious.

During the entire high-school period vocational insight and aims still require attention; but another culminating period for specific vocational guidance comes at the close of the pupil's secondary-school career, when all but a small percentage of those who remained in school four years after leaving the elementary school must begin to earn their living. Beyond the school, in the college, the need of vocational guidance is by no means at an end.

All this means that throughout his entire school career the pupil's vocational insight and vocational purposes should be progressively developed. Throughout his entire school career, as has been said, he should be led to seek an answer to the question, "What am I to be?" And about the time he must leave school he ought to have an answer to the questions, "How can I best realize my ambitions? What vocation ought I to choose?" Satisfactory answers to these questions are imperative. An ambitious and capable man or woman in the wrong occupation is a perversion of individual opportunity and an irreparable waste of social resources.